

Living with Visual Impairment in Guyana

Testimony of Blind Persons

In its recent project in Guyana, ERT uncovered widespread evidence of direct and indirect discrimination against people with disabilities, in both law and policy, as well as a multitude of practical barriers to their equal participation in society. Amongst them, but not atypically, members of the visually impaired community in Guyana face difficulties in accessing basic elements of social life including education, employment and transportation. They also encounter societal prejudice and a lack of understanding at an institutional and community level as well as in the family. However, there is a determination amongst the visually impaired community to improve the situation. In 2011, the President of the Guyana Society for the Blind was reported to have said:

“Persons with disabilities do not want pity or charity. We want to be able to live independent lives, to have the freedom to make our own decisions and to be in a position to contribute to our country’s development. We’re meeting outside Parliament at the close of Blind Awareness Month to remind our law-makers of their promises to us and to call for the implementation of the legislation so that we can learn skills for work, the same as anyone else, and have the opportunities to go for jobs, the same as anyone else, only then will we be truly independent.”¹

In June 2012, ERT spoke to two blind men about their experiences of living with a visual impairment in Guyana. Leroy Phillips, a broadcaster and Public Relations Officer for Guyana’s blind cricket team, spoke of his childhood and experiences in daily life. Ganesh Singh, a Commissioner at the National Commission on Disability, reflected on his own experiences and identified the multiple barriers to equality for other persons within the visually impaired community in Guyana.

Leroy Phillips

I was born in December 1990. I have lived with my paternal grandmother, since I was born. I was raised by my father, his mother and brothers and sisters. I lost my sight when I was only seven years old and still in primary school. My teacher threw the chalkboard eraser at me and shortly after that incident I lost my sight.

I grew up in a big household where I was discriminated against by my aunts and uncle when I did things that displeased them. They would call me names like “blind man” and “blind fool”. I would cry in the corner and felt emotional damage. This went on for a number of years.

Like everyone else, I attended school full time, but I did not receive the additional support needed in order for me to get the educa-

tion that I should have had. I experienced a lot of discrimination which I didn't notice at the time because I didn't have enough knowledge about it. It is only recently that I learned that I was discriminated against by my primary and secondary school friends. There were times when other students would knock me down and I would rely on teachers to lend a hand to me and put me back on the right path. I didn't know that this was discrimination. I thought it was normal, just what everyone went through when walking down the corridor at school.

Only one or two of my tests were in Braille. I did the majority of my exams with a scribe and a reader. I didn't have much exposure to Braille in primary school. I spent four years in primary school and I wasted a lot of time there. I didn't know what was happening or what was expected of me because I was a blind person in a class where all the other students had their sight. So I just went through the motions. I did not receive as much attention as the other students in the class. I was also punished severely, maybe more so than the other students. I can recall being beaten by my primary school teacher with a thick piece of wood for six lashes.

The lack of adequate teaching in Braille continued when I was in secondary school. The school had a lot of blind students but the teachers weren't qualified to teach us. So the teachers would have us do what they thought was best for us. They only taught us basic Braille. Although we were taught English, social studies, maths, science and history, the teachers didn't pay much attention to us. It was difficult to access books because other students would pretend to be using them and as a result I could never get work done as the other students did. The teachers never thought to let blind children have their notes taken down on a tape recorder or put



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Leroy Phillips

into Braille, or to have one of the teachers sit down with us to pass us the information, so that we could be taught at the same level as everyone else in the class. As a result, a lot of time was wasted.

The resources spent in educating a child with disabilities could have been harnessed to achieve better results. I look back and I can't help but think that I could have achieved so much more because so much money was being spent on me. But the quality wasn't there. A lot needs to be done for the blind and for other persons with disabilities so they can enjoy the same rights and education as anyone else. If this situation continues without any improvements, it will be terrible for persons with disabilities and they will have little chance of finding a job.

I have managed to acquire a job through luck. The National Communication Network Inc. started a broadcaster training program in May 2011. I visited the National Commission on Disability and then a volunteer from the UK called and asked me if I would be interested in broadcasting. When she started telling me about the television station, I said, "I'm not sure, the people there are going to be at a much higher level than me and I'm going to be embarrassed – I'm scared – I'll have to think about it". She told me I had time to think about it and to let her know when I decided. The very next day I contacted her and told her I was very interested in broadcasting and wanted to be on the radio and learn more about it – and that's exactly what I did. I got into the business and learned a lot. Even there, information wasn't very accessible to me, so I had to fend for myself. They never recorded audio versions of information, even though there was a recording studio at their disposal. They kept giving me papers. I would be sitting there for 20 minutes or half an hour just not speaking, trying to meditate about

what is being said. I had to strain to come up with a minute promo because I couldn't read it from a script. In spite of this, I like being on the radio, being heard, sharing my experience, and learning more about broadcasting.

I feel that I can generally participate equally in other areas of life. I have played blind cricket since 2006 and I act as the Public Relations Officer. I am able to speak publically through media and television. If my teammates go to parties, I will go with them. However, my parents don't take me to places. They say "what would be the point, you aren't going to see anything anyway". So I stay at home instead. This makes me distraught and sad, although I try to ignore the fact that I am hurt. A blind person might not be able to see anything but they can still go and enjoy the atmosphere.

I am able to use public transport and get around town. I'm confident and outgoing, particularly because I've been living in the same village for 21 years and the locals are very much aware of who I am. I began taking public transport on my own in 2008, when my father left the country to live in Trinidad. Previously, he never allowed me to take public transport on my own, and instead used to pick me up and drive me every day. He still tells me I have to be careful, as the roads are so busy. But I feel confident that there's a lot of help for me when it's time to cross the street, and I usually only need to cross a few busy streets. Most of the bus drivers are from my neighbourhood and they all know me. I go to the bus stop early and when they see me, they stop. They even fight for me to take their bus, giving me reasons to travel with them instead of someone else. I also use a lot of taxis and minibuses. I don't travel outside the region much, although I can do so on my own. I love my white cane. After I was taught how to use it in 2008, I gained a lot of the confidence I needed to travel on my own.

Ganesh Singh

I live in Guyana, where I am a Commissioner at the National Commission on Disability, a Public Relations Officer for the Guyana Council of Organisations of People with Disabilities, a member of the West Indies Blind Cricket Organisation, a member of the Guyana Society for the Blind, and the Coordinator of the Regional Network for Persons with Disabilities and Global Youth Network for Persons with Disabilities.

I acquired my blindness when I was seventeen. I would consider myself somewhat fortunate because I had opportunities in school. However, due to a lack of information and counselling, I was at home for five years as a blind person not knowing what to do or where to turn. There wasn't anywhere I could go to until I became aware of cricket for the blind and this led to opportunities

to be involved in a number of other things. I have tried to register at the University of Guyana, where blind students have previously attended, but I have had some difficulties and will apply again. There is no major discrimination there on that level. I have not experienced any issues with accessibility or with transportation.

My personal experience is unique because my family is very supportive and I am an assertive person. However, this is not representative of everyone else's experience and does not reflect the general situation in Guyana. I can get things done but other persons with disabilities cannot always get the same things done. The general situation of people living with disabilities in Guyana is bleak because many persons with disabilities cannot enjoy the rights that are inherent to them as human beings, and are enshrined in the Constitution of Guyana.



Ganesh Singh, member of the Guyana Blind Cricket Association, and Vice President of Young Voices, a group run by Guyana Society for the Blind aimed at empowering young people with disabilities in Guyana. Both organisations are VSO partners who work closely with VSO volunteer, Lucia Bellini, Capacity Builder for the Blind, in Georgetown, Guyana

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For instance, the policy is that education is free for all and that everyone ought to have access to education, but no considerations or special needs facilities have been put in place in order to foster education for persons with disabilities. Children who are blind or deaf are able to attend school but due to the lack of adequate support systems, such as having an interpreter or Braille, are prevented from actually getting an education. In Guyana, there are currently two schools for the blind with approximately 35 blind children between them. This number reflects a small minority of the blind children actually present in Guyana, and can be attributed to the lack of access to education for the majority of blind children. This indicates that violations of the rights of a person with disabilities are inherent from childhood in Guyana. If a child does not have access to proper education, then the chances of obtaining a position in the labour market are marginal.

Schools for persons with disabilities are not readily available location-wise and the ex-

pensive cost of transportation makes it difficult for families to send their children with disabilities to school, because most families are affected by poverty.

There is widespread discrimination against persons with disabilities. The discrimination is not always intentional and can be attributed to a lack of knowledge, sensitivity and unwillingness on the part of policy-makers to make a change. There are a number of cases where families keep their children at home because dealing with disabilities is a difficult task which requires special attention and knowledge. Since there is no readily available access to proper counselling and rehabilitation, the family has little or no knowledge of how to manage the situation or the opportunities that may be open to children with disabilities. As a result, the child is simply kept at home with no access to education or any other opportunities. This problem is widespread across Guyana. In Guyana, there are 23 organisations for persons with disabilities in eight administrative regions,

and currently fewer than 1,000 persons with disabilities in total are members of one or more of these organisations. In the last year, the Commission on Disability in Guyana started a national registration process. Using the information collected from the Bureau of Statistics which indicates the number of persons with disabilities that live in the various regions in Guyana, in combination with the data collected from the registration process, which has had a poor response, there are currently only 2,500 registered persons with disabilities living in Guyana. These statistics indicate that there are a large number of other persons with disabilities who are in their homes, kept away from the rest of society. A combination of factors such as stigma, insensitivity of families and generally negative culture as it relates to disability, cause persons with disabilities to stay away from society.

Even existing organisations such as the Society for the Blind have very little to offer to persons with disabilities. Such organisations are under-funded and as a result have difficulty in implementing projects that would benefit persons with disabilities.

In relation to access to infrastructure and buildings, there are few facilities or support systems in place to provide for the needs of persons with disabilities. Access to buildings via ramps and rails is a fairly new concept in Guyana. There are very few buildings which have a built-in ramp according to proper specifications able to cater for the needs of persons with disabilities. In most cases, the ramp has been installed for the purpose of conducting business, for example, conveying items and goods on a trolley into the business premises, rather than for assisting persons with disabilities. We have successfully lobbied for ramps to be placed in one or two other places. Most government administrative buildings, agencies and ministries

including the Ministry of Labour, Human Services and Social Security, which is responsible for disability issues, do not have any ramps. The cost of putting in a ramp is very small compared to the budgets of the various ministries and this shows the general unwillingness on the part of the authorities to make any changes.

During periods of flooding, the pavements around Georgetown are a nightmare as they have been washed away. Walking as a blind person or someone in a wheelchair is dangerous because they don't know when the pavement is going to drop off. They have to use the roads instead, where there are a number of manholes which are not covered. There are numerous stories about people walking into them. This is a reflection of the infrastructure in Guyana. I am convinced that it would not be expensive to make these changes. There are so many new buildings going up and so much money spent on roads, and yet there has been no consideration into putting a little slope at the end of the pavement to assist persons in wheelchairs, elderly persons or persons with pushchairs for their babies.

Transport is another nightmare. Guyana does not have a state operated transportation system, so persons with disabilities are at the mercy of the privately-operated mini-bus and taxi operators. They are always in a rush and picking up someone in a wheelchair will take time, and they don't want that. They complain that the wheelchair will scratch the bus or that it takes too long to load it on the bus. Every day you hear stories about companies doing things like this. There are a few that are willing and accommodating, but the majority are not.

With regard to technology, one good thing is that the government of Guyana has a "one laptop per family" programme. When they

launched the project, they did not have a registration form or anything like that. I persuaded them to include persons with disabilities as a category that should be given special priority. The government should be commended for this. I have trained blind persons who have received laptops with the screen-reading software, and the government has also given them headphones and external USB keyboards that make it more user-friendly. They have also subsidised transportation costs for these persons to go to the training.

There are some positive things occurring in Guyana to the benefit of persons with disabilities but these are insufficient to deal with the widespread problems which prevent them from fully enjoying their rights. I think that the disability movement should take a share of the blame. If we were strong and unified in our approach, we could influence a lot of change. Once the politicians feel the pressure, they will have to do something. Of course we are happy when they install a ramp somewhere, but they are really just doing what they are supposed to be doing. No government department is doing you a favour when they fulfil what you are entitled to.

The Persons with Disabilities Act 2010 reflects Guyana's international obligations and the needs of the country but only to a limited extent. When compared with the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), there are clearly large gaps in the Act. In some areas such as education and accessibility, the Act is in line with the CRPD. However, in a lot of other areas there is very little if any alignment between the Act and the CRPD.

It is good that Guyana has a Disability Act that requires that the services that a person with disabilities should have must be made

available. The disability movement can see that there is an effort. However, now that we have the Act we must work for the development of policies in the various ministries. That is a nightmare because after two years the government is nowhere near implementing the policies and there are no timelines or penalties if they do not. We are at the mercy of the ministries as we cannot force them but rather have to wait for them to act.

Guyana signed the CRPD but has not ratified it yet. The authorities do not see the need for ratification if we have a local instrument. Signing and ratifying is just a formality unless you sign and ratify the optional protocol, which gives the international treaty more teeth – otherwise it is just a piece of paper. Furthermore, even if the government signed the optional protocol, they could back out at anytime, if they thought that they might get into trouble because of discrimination or the violation of rights.

As well as implementing the Act, we need to amend it to make it more comprehensive and provide a much stronger legal framework to protect the rights of persons with disabilities. For example, there have been numerous cases recently reported about the rape and sexual abuse of persons with intellectual disabilities. When persons with disabilities report a crime, the law enforcement officers do not address the issue seriously. They make a mockery of them and laugh, and that is the end of the case. There are numerous examples such as an individual who was raped who went to the station to make a report and nothing was done and a young lady whose brother repeatedly physically abused her and the police did nothing about it.

It is only recently that in Guyana, persons with a mental health issue have been recognised as having a disability. Prior to this, they

were referred to in various ways as psychiatric patients. They were treated as having a severe medical issue and not something that limits their ability to function effectively in society. Other cognitive disabilities like learning disabilities, autism, and dyslexia are only now seen as disabilities. A few years ago, teachers would refer to those students in a derogatory manner, as being slow or dull. At the time, there were no assessment tools to diagnose these children with learning disabilities. Although some work is now

being done, there is still no assessment tool or procedure that is specifically aimed at identifying school children with such learning difficulties in order to provide them with specialised teaching. A lot of work needs to be done in order to ensure that persons with mental disabilities are able to enjoy their rights and lead an improved quality of life.

We have a lot of work to do in Guyana to implement the Disability Act and remove discrimination.